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ABSTRACT

Discovering pleasure in words should begin at a young age. But the discovery can continue among college students if oral communication courses offer parallels to the art and music appreciation courses which are part of most collegiate curricula. Some class activities which can enlarge appreciation of oral language are: (1) students may be assigned research reports in which they explore single words which are the essence of an entire philosophy or perspective; (2) students might be asked to examine a Shakespearean play to discover phrases which continue to enliven everyday speech; (3) students can study the drafts of master speakers to observe their search for the exact word or phrase to convey a particular meaning; (4) students can be exposed to contemporary authors and speakers reading their own work; (5) students can be asked to review the language of candidates in the last presidential campaign; and (6) students might increase their appreciation of language by looking at the lyrics which gave voice and definition to other times. A college oral communication classroom is an appropriate place to celebrate language so that students see it as a treasure instead of just a tool. (MG)

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Teaching Oral Language Appreciation

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In his memoir Wordstruck, Robert MacNeil (1989) affirms his love of the English language in all its forms: from the Canadian English he learned as a schoolboy in Halifax to Laurence Olivier's Shakespearian cadences to the voices of the BBC during World War II, from Cockney to West Indian to Texan to American black idioms. Throughout his life, the sounds of the spoken language have "struck" MacNeil--as a child hearing his mother read, as an adolescent actor, as a student of T. S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, and as a broadcast journalist. He writes:

> We forget perhaps that human language is primarily speech. It has always been and it remains so. The very word language means tongue. The ability to read and write is, at the most, five thousand years old, while speech goes back hundreds of thousands, perhaps a million years, to the remotest origins of our species. So, the aural pathways to the mind--to say nothing of the heart--must be wondrously extensive. Like the streets in a big city, you have many ways to get there. By contrast, the neural pathways developed by reading are arguably less well established, like scarce roads in uninhabited country.
>
> When an idea travels through the brain to become speech, the little excitement leaves a trace, as a pioneer in the virgin forest left traces so that others could follow.... Since all of us as infants, and most of us as adults, pass infinitely more time listening and speaking than reading and writing, my assumption is that the aural tracings have made

> better circuits and carry a stronger current to the emotions than the parallel circuits carrying the printed word. Speak to me and you will move me; write to me and I'll have to think about it. (pp. 185-186)

The unexpected success of the film Dead Poets Society in the summer of 1989 may be an indication of the natural responsiveness to oral language that MacNeil attributes to aural circuitry. The film's teacher, John Keating, not only awakens teenage boys to the magic of poetry--but, surprisingly, moves computer-age audiences, as though reminding them that word patterns can be more than "bites" and words can be savored as well as "processed." One may argue that audiences were initially attracted to Dead Poets Society by the popularity of actor Robin Williams. But it is also true that Williams' comedic reputation (from "Mork" to his monologues to Good Morning Vietnam) is primarily due to his remarkable dexterity with oral language. Perhaps in the character of John Keating, Williams awakens additional "aural tracings" and leads audiences deeper into their own responsiveness.

Like the film representation of Keating, MacNeil (1989) is no advocate of grammatical dogmatism; he does not suggest making English the official language; he does not lament the inroads of informal usage. But he does see the language as a treasure that is too little valued. MacNeil believes the language is best preserved when it gives pleasure to its users, and he regrets that such pleasure is often lost. He writes:

> Who enthuses about English today? Who transmits enthusiasm? Obviously some professionals do: teachers, professors, critics, and writers. But what of the amateurs, those who love English words and phrases the way other people love porcelain or music? I have come to think that sharing and transmitting that pleasure is something the culture does not encourage--in fact, may actively discourage, in the sense of the French origin of the work <u>décourager</u>: to take the heart out of it. (p. 216)

Discovering pleasure in words should begin at a young age. But the discovery can continue among college students if oral communication courses offer parallels to the art and music appreciation which is part of most collegiate curricula. The basic speech course, as well as oral interpretation and advanced public speaking, are obvious courses where language appreciation can be fostered. But such attention is even more needed in business communication, public relations, and broadcasting courses--to leaven career education and emphasize that language is more than a tool.

The remainder of this paper offers ideas intended for use in college-level communication courses. The goal of each suggestion is an enlarged appreciation of oral language.

1. Students may be assigned research reports in which they explore single words which are the essence of an entire philosophy or perspective. Some examples are Madeleine L'Engle's (1973)

reflections on "deepening" and "naming," Viktor Frankl's (1963) redefinition of "responsibility," Robert Pirsig's (1974) discovery of "enthusiasm," Martin Buber's (1958) conception of "Thou," John Knowles (1959) perception of "peace" and his reassessment of the "enemy," Charles Hampden-Turner's (1970) definition of "radical," May Sarton's (1976) concept of "muse," and Helene Hanff's (1973) description of "education."

2. Students might be asked to examine a Shakespearian play to discover phrases which continue to enliven everyday speech. MacNeil (1989) offers 52 examples from Hamlet alone, including "I am sick at heart," "brevity is the soul of wit," "in my mind's eye," and "the lady doth protest too much."

3. Students can study the drafts of master speakers to observe their search for the exact word or phrase. A class discussion can be based on Franklin D. Roosevelt's change of "a date which will live in world history" to "a date which will live in infamy" in the first line of his Declaration of War Address (as shown in a draft held by the National Archives). A more extensive comparison can be done of the five existing versions of the Gettysburg Address--all in Lincoln's handwriting (Mearns and Dunlap, 1963). These manuscripts include his reading copy, a copy apparently written as a gift for John Hay after Lincoln's return to Washington, and three copies written over the following three months to be sold for charity. Each version shows changes in words and phrases as Lincoln continued to refine his language. A comparison of the manuscripts allows students to consider the

stylistic choices facing Lincoln, and also recognize Lincoln's appreciation for the language he was weighing so carefully. A further comparison can be made to the stenographic copy of the Gettysburg Address as it appeared in The New York Times, November 20, 1863; this version shows that Lincoln made spontaneous departures from his reading copy and incorporated some of these changes into his later versions. A contrast might also be drawn to a whimsical version of the address cast as a less able speaker might have said it (Jensen, 1957).

4. Students can be exposed to contemporary authors and speakers reading their own work--giving voice to the words they have crafted so carefully. The availability of audio recordings has been greatly enhanced by the work of The American Prose Library (P.O. Box 842, Columbia, MO 65205) which collects, preserves, and distributes recordings of artists discussing and reading their work. The Library's 1988-1989 catalog includes readings from James Agee, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, James Dickey, John Knowles, Barry Lopez, and N. Scott Momaday, among many others.

5. Students can be asked to review the language of candidates in the last presidential campaign. Speeches by George Bush and Michael Dukakis might be considered in light of John Ciardi's plea in another presidential year:

> This year, as in every year, the issue is language....
>
> The issue remains our need to re-create the language in which we can know ourselves and our purposes. Only in that

> tongue, could we find it, lies our hope of speaking the problems to ourselves and forming ourselves equal to the problems we have found our own best terms for....
>
> I have no need to agree with everything . . . [the candidates] say; it is the sound of their saying I need, those terms in which a man meets principle if only to fail it, but to fail it at an altitude better than all lower successes. (p. 10)

Twenty years later, MacNeil (1989) doubts that leaders are finding that level of language. He writes:

> There must be some living connection between the weight of words and truth--not literal, factual truth, perhaps, but an effort at truth, like the effort of a poet, someone who struggles for truth. Today, it seems, words increasingly mean nothing to the person using them, have no connection to what he believes, yet are presented as though they had. (p. 225)

After discussing representative speeches from the 1988 campaign in light of Ciardi's and MacNeil's statements, students might listen to excerpts from Adlai Stevenson's (Scourby, 1965) speeches in 1952 and 1956--weighing the differences in language, and perhaps the contrasting levels of conviction the words reveal.

6. Students might increase their appreciation of language by looking at the lyrics which gave voice and definition to other times--e.g., The Weavers' union songs of the 1930s, Pete Seeger's and Bob Dylan's civil rights and anti-war songs of the 1960s, Joni

Mitchell's "Woodstock." A useful class study could be made of the music of the 1980s--seeking the troubadours (to the extent they exist) who have voiced the issues and aspirations of this decade. Questions can be raised about the devaluing of lyrics in some rock music and the misinterpretation of other lyrics (e.g. "I Was Born in the USA").

MacNeil (1989) speaks of a "shriveling" of the language sense when the spoken word is undervalued, as though the aural circuitry in the mind becomes disconnected from disuse. Neil Postman (1987) enlarges on this image when he writes:

> It is said that the brain is the only organ in our body that feels no pain and therefore does not know when it is injured. In other words, the brain does not regard brain damage as a problem. If we think of language as the brain of a civilization, then it is possible that language-damage--especially severe language-damage--may not be perceived by the social body as a problem; . . . it is possible that we have adapted ourselves to disinformation, to Newspeak, to public relations hype, to imagery disguised as thought, to picture newspapers and magazines, to religion given in the form of entertainment, to politics in the form of a 30 second television commercial. And in adapting ourselves, we then accept the present situation as the only available standard, and conclude with Dr. Pangloss that this is the best of all possible worlds. (p. 3)

A collegiate oral communication classroom is an appropriate place to refute Dr. Pangloss by offering higher standards of language. It is also the place to celebrate the language so that students see it as a treasure instead of a tool--and find in it the pleasure which alone secures its preservation.

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